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June 10, 1975

Dr. M. Mohammadian
Seraye Faredanesh
Teheran, Iran

© genetic counselling

Dear Dr. Mohammadian,

I have your interesting letter of June 4th with respect to the prospects of an institute for biological research and genetic counselling in Teheran. I am delighted to know of the emphasis that you plan to give on family planning and genetic counselling and would, of course, be eager to provide whatever help I can to such humanitarian ends. I do not know exactly what you can expect from me; and it will not be possible for me to travel so far during the next few months, but there is perhaps a fair bit that I can do by mail.

One of my first questions is whether you have already developed any general guidelines for the research institute, for example, whether it will be more or less confined to studies with an immediate clinical bearing, or whether you are planning to go more broadly into basic research in cellular and molecular genetics. Depending on the period of time during which you expect to have practically important results, one might find either policy to be preferable.

Insofar as you do ask me for advice, I will venture to make a few comments in all candor.

We have found from experience in this country that genetic counselling is an area that is quite capable of generating a great deal of misunderstanding and controversy. It inevitably touches on such issues as abortion on the one hand and fears about statist intervention into private family matters, and even genocide on the other. I am sure that you are aware that there has been substantial expression of opposition to relationships between American universities and the Government of Iran on the part of a variety of dissident groups and their sympathizers. I do not wish to enter into an unrequested political commentary, but it seems important to point out that the combination of general sensitivity to some practical applications of human genetics and this political mood need to be given very careful thought in the planning of programs and particularly in any public statements about them. It is remarkably easy for the most innocent intentions or remarks to be exaggerated and distorted, and this could do great harm in a variety of ways.

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I am for myself proceeding on the assumption that the plans that you have in mind fall strictly within the ethical aims of the medical profession in the alleviation of congenital disease. Since questions will be raised incessantly about the possible application of new genetic technologies, and their potential abuse, I am taking the liberty of including some of my own writings in that general area.

The most energetic activity, particularly of a coordinating kind, that we have in this country in the field of genetic counselling, is undertaken by the National Foundation (Birth Defects), and if you have not already done so, I suggest that you contact Dr. Daniel Bergsma, Vice President for Professional Education, The National Foundation-March of Dimes, White Plains, New York 10605, and Dr. Samuel Ajl, Vice President for Research, The National Foundation-March of Dimes, 1275 Mamaroneck Avenue, White Plains, New York 10605. In addition, the National Institute for General Medical Sciences, of which Dr. Ruth Kirschstein is the Director, has a focussed program for the support of research in this general area, and you may wish to direct further inquiries there as well.

As informational resource in this field, I would direct your attention to the weekly ASCATOPICS service of which I enclose a sample. Although the computer generated reports are diluted by perhaps 10% or 20% of irrelevant articles, this is an absolutely invaluable means of obtaining most up-to-date information on progress in this field.

The National Foundation can send you a directory of essentially all of the active workers in the field of genetic counselling, but I would also particularly direct your attention to the program at Johns Hopkins Medical School with both Dr. Victor McKusick and Dr. Barton Childs as leaders. Dr. McKusick's encyclopedia "Mendelian Inheritance in Man" is one of the most valuable reference sources for the genetic basis of a very wide variety of disease-states.

With respect to other research and clinical service centers, I have been deeply impressed by the quality of work in clinical genetics that is proceeding in Israel, and I hope that you will find it possible to take advantage of the evident merits of scientific cooperation in that arena. I am enclosing a page that I have copied out of the National Foundation International Directory and have checked a few of the places that from my own knowledge I believe to be of particularly high quality. This merit perhaps also belongs to others but I am not informed about all of them.

While scanning this directory, I noticed that there was also an entry from Iran which I also attach for your information.

I realize that much of the information that I have furnished you may be redundant but it seemed to me to be the better course to furnish all of it and rely upon your tolerance for a restatement of some otherwise well known material.

Sincerely yours,